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Distance Education during the COVID-19 pandemic

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic led many Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) to transition to an online learning model. This change has increased the need to assess students' opinions about Distance Education (DE). This study surveyed students from Portugal, Ukraine and UAE about their views concerning DE during the pandemic. Almost one thousand students from the three countries responded and shared their opinions on DE and willingness to take online courses after the pandemic. Results show that although students may have a favourable opinion about DE, many would like to return to on-campus classes. Students also reported they would prefer to take blended and synchronous DE course formats after the pandemic.

Literature Review

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of students are at risk of not pursuing their education, and future generations can be affected by this global event (UNESCO, 2020). According to Marinoni et al. (2020), IHEs faced many challenges due to the pandemic, and the quality of education and equity of learning opportunities may decrease significantly.

IHEs have shifted to DE since the pandemic began, thus changing students' educational experiences worldwide. Although millions of students have acquired experience in DE during the last year, many still show reservations about this learning mode (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). IHEs made substantial efforts to continue providing educational services for their students showing much creativity and resilience. However, the pandemic may provide IHEs with a unique opportunity to upgrade their educational offerings, update their technological resources and pedagogical practices (Toquero, 2020). Soon, educational laws and policies may need to be revised to ensure a more robust academic route for students of all ages and levels (UNESCO & IESALC, 2020).

Methodology

An online survey with 12 questions about DE was e-mailed to undergraduate and graduate students from Portugal, Ukraine and UAE during the fall semester of 20/21. A self-selected sample of 980 students from the three countries completed the survey. The primary purpose of the survey was to assess students' opinion about DE, reasons to enroll/not enroll in DE courses, and preferred types of online courses after the pandemic.

This research compares results between the three countries and patterns of association between variables. Data analysis included descriptive statistics, correlational and inferential analysis.

Initial results

Participants were both male and female, although most respondents (over 75%) in the three countries were female. Participants age ranged from 17 to 63 years.

There were significant differences between

Ukrainian students reported a more positive attitude about DE and showed a significant difference from the Portuguese students' attitude. The UAE students attitudes about DE were not significantly different from the other two countries.

Participants were also asked about reasons for students to enroll/not enroll in DE courses. The participants selected several reasons to enroll in DE. The most frequently chosen was the pandemic, followed by not travelling to school and saving time by studying from any location (Figure 1). The participants also selected reasons not to enroll in DE courses. The most frequently mentioned reasons were preferring face-to-face classes, missing campus life, and having difficulty interacting with others online.

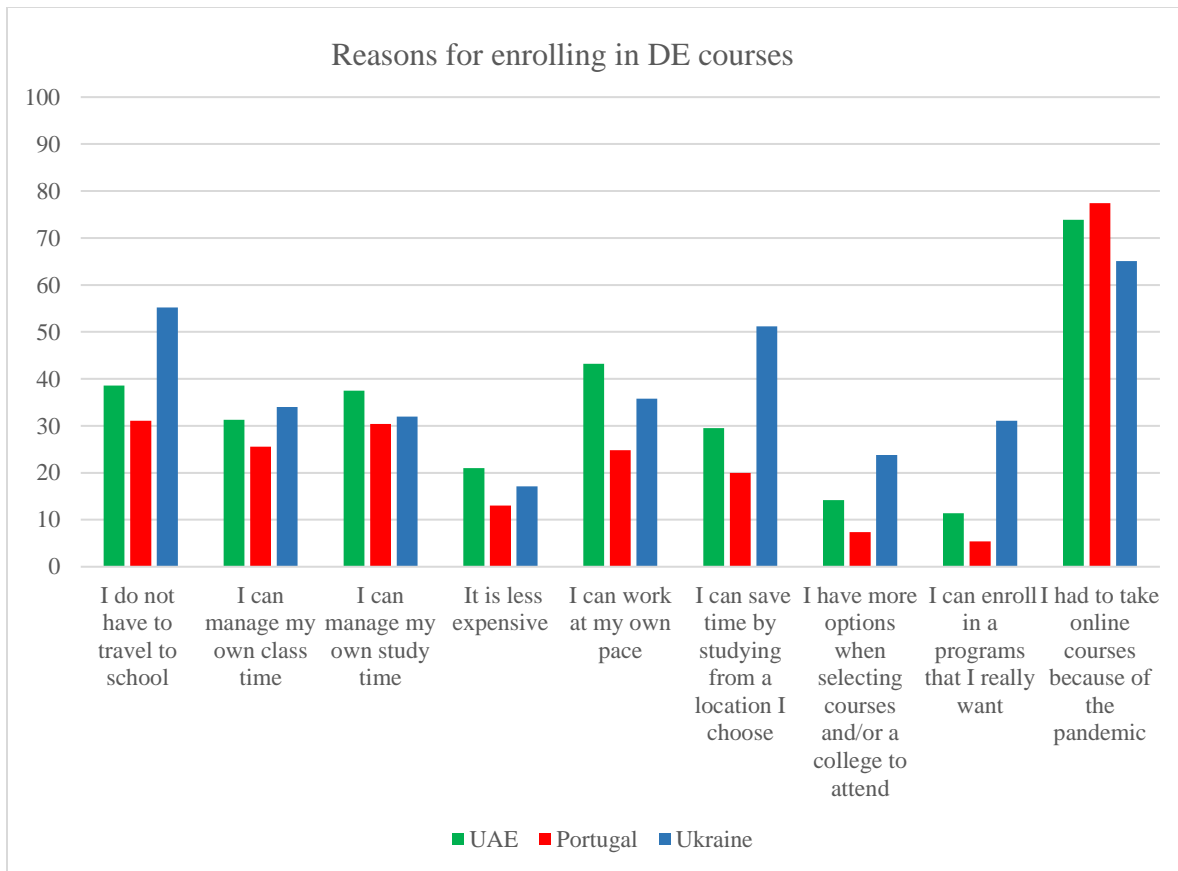


Figure 1 Reasons for enrolling in DE courses

Students' interest in enrolling in DE courses after the pandemic showed no significant differences between the three countries. However, age group and country indicated a significant interaction. Portuguese students reported less interest in enrolling in DE than the Ukrainian and UAE students after the pandemic.

Regarding the preferred types of DE students would be interested in taking after the pandemic, UAE students chose synchronous and Blended Learning (BL) courses, while Portuguese and Ukrainian students said they prefer BL courses. However, many participants also stated they would not be interested in taking online courses after the pandemic.

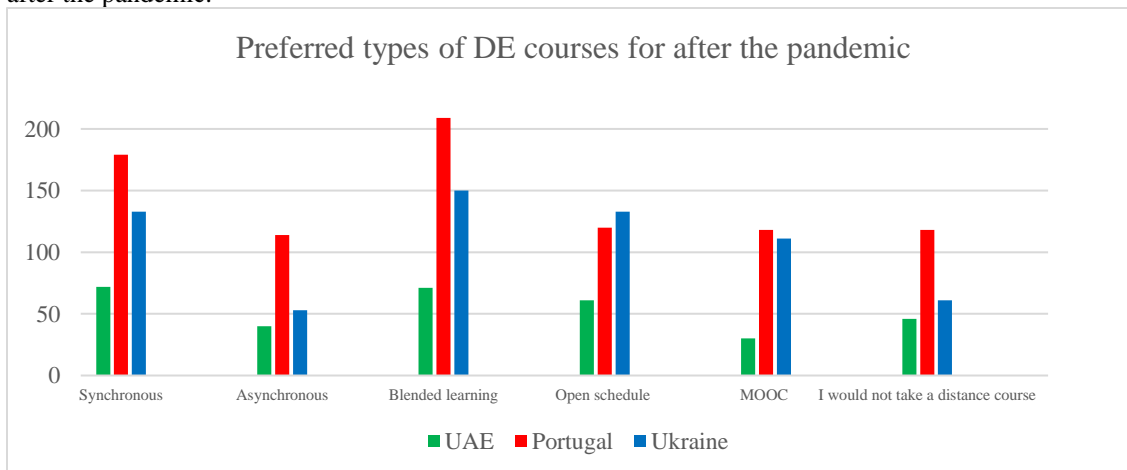


Figure 2 Preferred types of DE courses for after the pandemic

Conclusion

At the time of this study, students have had two semesters of DE courses. However, data shows that students' opinion about DE is on average neutral, although it is more favourable among the Ukrainian participants. If online learning environments are to be adopted more widely, IHEs need to address students' concerns regarding DE. In addition, more input from all stakeholders is required.

The challenges ahead for the educational sector are not clear since the pandemic is still ongoing. However, moving forward, robust strategies need to be developed to support education in all contexts. Research on students' opinions and requirements about taking DE courses can help educators explore different learning models and long-term educational opportunities.

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